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McClellan, George Brinton

Inaugural address of
George B. McClellan...

Trenton

1878

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INAUGURAL ADDRESS

p. 54

OF

GEORGE B. McCLELLAN,

GOVERNOR OF NEW JERSEY,

JANUARY 15, 1878.



TRENTON, N. J.:
NAAR, DAY & NAAR, PRINTERS
1878.

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INAUGURAL ADDRESS.

Senators, Gentlemen of the General Assembly, and Fellow Citizens :

An admirable provision of the Constitution of our State so regulates the time for the inauguration of a new Governor, as to enable his predecessor to give the benefit of his ripe experience and disinterested judgment, to the Legislature, in his last annual message.

Under these circumstances, it is not necessary, nor is it expected, that the new incumbent should dwell upon matters of detail in the customary inaugural address. I shall, therefore, follow a time-honored custom when I confine myself to brief allusions to a few topics of general interest, where important principles are involved.

It is a striking proof of the ability of the administration of my honored predecessor, and a source of sincere gratification to all the citizens of the State, that he has been enabled to advise the reduction of the State tax from one and one-half to one mill upon the dollar. I trust that his recommendation will be carried into effect, and ask your cordial co-operation in such a system of legislation and administration as will soon make further reductions possible.

The financial condition of our people is such as to render it imperative to practice the closest economy compatible with efficient administration and the honor of the Commonwealth. While all unnecessary offices should be abolished, and the compensation allowed for necessary work strictly scrutinized, it should never be forgotten that the laborer is worthy of his hire, and that there is no true economy--but, on the contrary, real extravagance--in reducing the compensation for positions demanding a high order of intellect, learning, integrity and experience,

below the point required to secure the cheerful services of the men best fitted to fill them.

Appropriations for new purposes should be confined within the limits of strict necessity, and the inauguration of any public undertaking, however meritorious in itself, which involves an increased expenditure without immediate returns, should, whenever practicable, be postponed until prosperity again smiles upon our people.

The most urgent matter within the sphere of our action, is to give to the people of this State the greatest possible relief from their burdens during the financial depression, and to do all in our power to hasten the return of a better state of affairs.

In this country the power of a State Government is limited—in one direction, by the concessions made to the General Government in the Federal compact; in the other, by the rights of counties and municipalities to regulate their own domestic affairs. But within these limits every State has reserved its full rights of sovereignty, and, by a judicious use of its powers and influence, may still accomplish much for its own and something for the general welfare.

In regard to those subjects over which exclusive jurisdiction was conceded to the General Government, the State Government can exercise a direct influence only by the selection of Senators representing the interests and sentiments of the people, and by a frank expression of opinion at appropriate times; while the people themselves possess a direct influence through their representatives in Congress and their votes in the Presidential elections.

These considerations, if constantly held in view by the people, should induce them to see to it that none but true and able men are permitted to represent them in the National Councils, and in the days now present should never be lost sight of, for there are subjects pending replete with interest to us and our children which demand all our care, all our vigilance, and the intelligent formation and candid expression of our opinions.

There are two or three in regard to which I believe that you, gentlemen of the Legislature, will all agree with me, and concerning which it seems proper to speak briefly.

The first is the so-called Southern Question.

However some of us may have differed in regard to the manner of prosecuting the late war, however widely we may have been at variance as to the manner of dealing with its results, and with the seceding States when it was over, I apprehend that there is little difference of opinion among us as to the present condition of affairs. I am sure that we all agree in accepting as final the emancipation of the negro, and his claim to full and ample protection in all the rights of a free-man. I cannot believe that any considerable number of the people of New Jersey fail to understand that their own prosperity and that of the nation are inseparably connected with that of the Southern States, and that the prosperity of those States can be secured only by the full enjoyment of their rights of self-government, with the attendant consequences of peace, order and security.

Those States are now in entire possession of these rights, and the result is manifest to all in the absence of disturbance, and in the slow but sure return of a prosperity which, if not rudely disturbed by other causes, will soon react upon us and give employment to very many of the idle hands among us.

I trust, gentlemen, that you will agree with me in gladly accepting the existing settlement of the Southern Question as final, and in insisting that no selfish interest of individuals or mistaken policy of party shall be allowed to revive a subject which honor and interest alike require to be buried forever among the dead issues of the irrevocable past.

The next national subject of great and immediate interest to us in New Jersey, is the financial question. It is not necessary to repeat the long history of our national financial policy since the beginning of the great civil war; to relate how irredeemable paper money took the place of gold and silver, and to what fluctuations and depreciation it was subject; to repeat how enormous expenditures were made, and an immense bonded debt contracted, how we demonstrated our ability and intention to meet the debt by paying off large portions of the principal and faithfully meeting the interest; how the inflation which always results from the combination of a long war with irredeemable paper money culminated, in 1873, in the usual and inevitable crisis; how our legal tender paper has at length nearly reached

par, and how our securities came at last to be regarded at home and abroad with such faith as to command universal confidence, and enable the General Government to refund large amounts at low rates of interest. For my present purpose it is only necessary to call your attention to these results, and affirm that the good standing of the securities of our General Government is due solely to the fact that capitalists at home and abroad became convinced that we can and will pay the principal in full when it falls due, and honestly meet the interest as it accrues. Let this conviction be shaken or destroyed, and the inevitable result will be the destruction of the credit and reputation of our National Government and people; no more bonds can be placed at low rates of interest, and those now held abroad will soon find their way back, draining the country of an equivalent amount of gold. Nor will the evil cease here, for honor and credit are such sensitive plants that they shrink at the very touch of suspicion, and wither away under the rude blast of well grounded distrust. So that, once give the world good reason to impugn our national integrity, which with us is identical with that of the majority of our people, and there is not a commercial enterprise, not a manufacturing interest, not an agricultural undertaking, which will not soon feel the baneful effects.

The nature of our country, its situation, the needs and pursuits of our people are such that not only is it impossible for us to cut off commercial intercourse with foreign nations, but, for the return of prosperity, it is absolutely necessary that we should foster and increase that intercourse to the greatest possible extent, in order to develop markets for the surplus products of our fields and factories.

At the very basis of the wealth and industry of the country—the solid foundation on which the entire superstructure rests, and without which it cannot exist—is agriculture.

Agriculture, taken in its broadest sense, cultivates the soil, produces food for man and beast, animals for domestic use, and raw materials for clothing and the countless purposes of the useful and ornamental arts.

Mining brings from the earth the crude ores, which, in transmuted forms, serve such invaluable purposes.

Internal commerce is the intermediate agent which takes the

raw material from the hands of the producer and transfers it to the manufacturer or the home market.

Manufacture transforms this raw material into new and useful shapes, thus preparing it for use and sale.

Foreign commerce takes alike raw material and manufactured goods, and conveys them to other countries, where it sells or barter them, and brings back the results to enrich our own country. Our country does not now, and probably never can, provide a home market for the consumption of all our raw and manufactured products, so that all industry would stagnate and expire from over supply were it not for foreign markets. These various pursuits are so inseparably connected that any injury to one is soon felt by all the others.

Fertile as is our soil, varied as is our climate, manifold as are our industries, we cannot produce within our limits all the useful and ornamental articles that modern civilization requires.

Providence has given us possession of a continent so placed upon the borders of great oceans and in the highway of trade, as to make it impossible to avoid commerce and communication with the nations of the earth; more than that, we cannot withstand the action of that great law which compels those possessed of unusual advantages to use them wisely, at the peril of decline and suffering.

We must accept the situation which God has provided for us, and, willingly or reluctantly, acknowledge the fact that we cannot avoid commercial intercourse with other nations, and therefore we must conform to those principles of honesty in the fulfillment of obligations, to those standards of financial values and to those commercial usages which prevail throughout the civilized world, as the results of the experience of many centuries.

A nation or an individual who borrows money may, if strong enough to resist coercion or wily enough to elude pursuit, avoid payment, but certainly the defaulter can never again obtain money from, or have any dealings with, those cognizant of the original transaction, save on terms so stringent as to preclude the possibility of a repetition of the knavery and secure reimbursement for the losses of the past.

Again, a savage tribe, cut off from the rest of the world by the forest or the ocean, may agree among themselves that a cowry shell shall pass current for a pig or a cow, or for an hundred of

them; but when civilized men, or other savages who do not place the same value upon cowry shells, come among them for the purposes of trade, they will inevitably refuse to accept them at a price beyond their real value elsewhere, unless they happen to know of some other simple races having something to sell, who will take them at the fictitious appraisal.

Now this affects the agricultural and manufacturing classes of the West and South quite as much as it does the commercial classes of the seaboard. Unless commerce can dispose of the surplus products of the West and South, their interests must languish, suffer and perish. The commercial men cannot use cowry shells abroad, nor can they, under a system which enacts that a cowry shell shall be a dollar, profitably dispose at home of objects purchased abroad under a system which provides that a dollar shall be just a dollar, and nothing more or less. If the farmer is foolish enough to accept a cowry for a dollar, in the sale of his grain, he will find when he desires to expend it at the store that he will receive for it only what the storekeeper considers its intrinsic value, and not a dollar's worth, for the simple reason that the seller cannot afford to make him a present of the difference in value.

The reason why the legal tender notes depreciated so much at one time, was that there was then little confidence in the ability of the Government to redeem them. As that confidence increased and approached certainty, so the difference between legal tenders and gold diminished, and whenever the feeling is universal that the Government can, and speedily will, redeem them in full in gold, then they will be at par. The legal tender paper money never had any intrinsic value in itself any more than the cowry shell; its only value was in the greater or less confidence that it would finally be redeemed in gold.

The case may be briefly stated thus: it is our interest to fund the debt at the lowest possible rate of interest, in order to diminish the burden of taxation; it is our interest that a large proportion of our bonds should be held abroad, in order that the money paid for them may remain in this country, and increase the amount of gold available for domestic uses; it is our interest to develop to the greatest practicable extent our commercial relations with all parts of the world, in order to dispose of our surplus products, obtain what we need of those of other countries,

and secure for ourselves the profits resulting from the transaction; it is our interest to place our currency, or circulating medium, on a sound basis, which will prevent unnecessary, frequent, and always injurious fluctuations of values, and to adopt the same standard with the rest of the world, in order to facilitate commercial transactions; finally, as the great object of all, it is our interest to hasten the return of confidence, security, industry, economy and prosperity to our suffering people.

If this view be correct, there can be no doubt that the good people of the State of New Jersey will agree with me in the conviction that it is a duty to express, in the clearest and most decided terms, reprobation of all attempts to violate the sacredness of obligations, to avoid the payment of any portion of our just debts, to impair the national honor and credit, or to declare by law that a part of a dollar shall be a whole dollar.

There is probably no grave objection to the remonetization of silver within proper limits, that is to say, to making it a legal tender for small amounts, so as to secure its use in small transactions and for convenience in making change. But in this event the silver dollar should certainly be made equal, in present value at least, to the gold dollar, and in that case it is not probable that the inevitable fluctuations would produce any very serious inconvenience. If nothing is done to impair confidence in the national credit, we are on the road to prosperity, and the legal tender paper money, will soon be so nearly at par that specie payments will be practically resumed.

More than this, if no legislation is carried out by the National Government destroying the feeling of security on the part of investors, capital will soon seek employment, and we shall see the first steps towards and the first fruits of returning prosperity in an improved condition of the working classes.

But if the proposed measure becomes a law, by which a silver dollar, really worth only about ninety cents, is declared to be a legal tender for a gold dollar in all transactions, values will again become unsettled, returning confidence will be destroyed, and a blow struck at our national honor and credit, from which we will not recover for long years, and even then not before we have passed through a series of misfortunes, losses and dishonor that no lover of his country cares to contemplate.

Between a government and its creditors, all questions should be

determined only on principles of the highest honor and honesty, and this the more where the creditor has no power to enforce his rights by law. Silver has long been a metal of varying value, and the honor of governments has been relied on, whenever silver was made a legal tender, to equalize the value of its silver with its gold coinage. No honest man would expect to retain reputation if he, when thus relied on to do common honesty, failed at the moment of paying his debt, and compelled his creditor to accept payment in a depreciated metal.

A government which has legal tender coins of different and fluctuating values, and avails itself of the fluctuations, to the injury of its creditors and the benefit of its treasury, becomes a speculator in the markets, loses its character for honesty, and in a pressing hour of need will be sure to find itself, like other distrusted speculators, bankrupt and disgraced.

We of New Jersey, in common with our fellow citizens throughout the land, have a deep interest in the restoration of the commercial marine of the nation, and I do not doubt that all members of the Legislature agree with me in the earnest desire that Congress may promptly do whatever is within its power to accomplish that vital object by removing whatever restrictions and impediments of any kind existing laws may offer.

We have also an immediate concern in such a revision of the Tariff laws as shall simplify and cheapen their execution, remove every unnecessary burden and impediment from home industries, reduce to the greatest practicable extent the number of articles on which duties are collected, and make these laws inure to the benefit of the greatest possible number of the people.

Within a year events of grave magnitude have taken place in regard to the Presidential election, which prove that the laws regulating such elections, and ascertaining their results, are insufficient in their present form.

A majority of the people of this country feel that a great wrong was done, and that serious complications—perhaps even civil war—were avoided only by the forbearance and patriotic spirit of that party which undoubtedly cast the majority of votes at the election in question. The country cannot afford the

repetition of such scenes, nor is it probable that they would again be quietly submitted to. The State of New Jersey, in common with each one of her sister States, has the right, and it is her duty, to urge through those who represent her in the national councils, that this grave and far-reaching question shall receive at the hands of Congress such a wise, deliberate and searching examination as shall lead to the enactment of laws fully covering cases not clearly foreseen when the Constitution was adopted. These laws should furnish a guarantee in the future that the voice of the majority shall be respected, and that the vital question of the choice of the Chief Executive of the nation shall be placed beyond the reach of chicanery and fraud. These laws should also be such that none may doubt the fairness of the result reached, and the suggestion of a necessity to take up arms in defence of the purity of the ballot box and the expression of the people's will, become impossible.

In such a period of financial disaster as that under which we have suffered for more than four years, all classes necessarily experience great losses. The rich and those in comfortable circumstances have felt it sometimes in the total loss of their possessions, and sometimes in such a serious decrease of income as to compel them to diminish their expenditures in many ways, and thus throw working people out of employment. Fortunate are those who have preserved enough to supply them with the comforts of life, while so many have found it a hopeless struggle even to obtain the necessities of existence. This state of affairs has fallen with peculiar rigor upon the working classes.

The General Government has it in its power to do much towards the alleviation of this sad condition by wise legislation. The State Government has very little direct power in the premises; it can do little more than practice rigid economy in its own expenditures, and use whatever power and influence it possesses to secure for counties and municipalities the most simple and economical forms of government, under the direct control of the people themselves. It also can and should exercise a rigid supervision over such institutions as serve as depositories of the people's money, to prevent losses and punish fraud.

And just here, it is of the highest importance that those classes who are the depositors in these institutions should remember

that they are the capitalists whose money is invested or deposited on the faith of government securities, and that they have the highest interest in the preservation of the national honor and credit.

The condition of the working classes, and the question of their just relations with employers, is certainly one of the most important of the present and the future. In prosperous times less is heard of it, but with every recurrence of financial pressure it reappears. The subject is so complex, so delicate, that it requires thorough knowledge for its successful treatment, and its importance is such that legislators should seek to gain a proper understanding of it, in order that they may do whatever is practicable towards its solution. Among other States, Massachusetts has taken this matter in hand through a Bureau of Statistics of Labor. Although I fully recognize the fact that the surest and most direct remedies for the present unsatisfactory condition of the laboring classes are to be sought in general economy and in sound financial measures, yet I commend to your most careful consideration this question of the relations between laborers and employers, with the confident expectation that, through the establishment of a Bureau of Statistics, or otherwise, you will be able to devise some simple and practicable method of collating such information as will serve as a guide for legislation upon this vital and most interesting subject, and that this State will do whatever is in its power for the relief of the suffering classes. In connection with the collection of such statistics of labor, it would be very desirable to gather information bearing upon the advantages offered by our State for manufacturing and other industrial pursuits.

It is unnecessary, on this occasion, to allude to the subject of Education in our Public Schools, further than to say that I will give my cordial co-operation in every effort to perfect the system, and to make it thoroughly economical, practical and useful.

Were other proof lacking, the well known occurrences of the past summer establish the wisdom and necessity of maintaining an adequate force of the National Guard in a thoroughly efficient condition.

The regular army of the United States, should never be called upon to suppress riots and disturbances, except as a last resort; and it is the duty of every State to provide the means of keeping the peace within its own territory; this can best be done by maintaining a well organized and well disciplined national guard of moderate strength. The National Guard of New Jersey performed thoroughly well the duty imposed upon it during the riots of the year just passed, and is entitled to the cordial approval of the government and of the people.

In my connection with it my efforts will be directed rather towards perfecting its organization, instruction and efficiency, than towards increasing the number of its companies or battalions.

The great need, the most urgent demand of the people at this time is for economy and relief from their burdens. I have already expressed my appreciation of this fact, and my entire sympathy with those from whom this cry comes. Nothing within my power shall be left undone to effect just and intelligent economy in the administration of the affairs of the State; but I must speak frankly.

There is no reason to suspect that extravagance has prevailed in the State Government; I believe that my able predecessors in office have done their best to reduce expenses.

In consequence, chiefly, of the completion of the Morristown Asylum, a large reduction in the State Tax has become possible, and there is ground to hope that, with care and judgment, further reductions may be effected in the future. But I desire to impress, not only upon you, gentlemen of the Legislature, but upon all the citizens of the State, the conviction that it is not from the State Government alone you should seek the needed relief. In the administration of the affairs of counties, municipalities and towns, you will often find a far wider and more fertile field for economy. So far as the Legislature is called upon to act, it appears to be a proper policy to provide, under general laws, very simple and economical forms of government for these communities, the controlling principle being that in each department there should be a single head, chosen by and directly responsible to the people, except in cases where it is advisable to create, for a small community, one single head chosen by the peo-

ple, giving him the power and responsibility of selecting his subordinates. However that may be, it should be the universal rule throughout these subordinate communities that the people directly interested have the practical power to appoint their own agents, bring them to account, and remove them promptly for wrong doing. It is sometimes said that such a system, although theoretically excellent, will fail because the people do not take the trouble to interest themselves in its proper working. To this it is a full reply that such people are not worthy of free institutions, and deserve no sympathy in the sufferings and losses due to their own neglect. Moreover, the very principle upon which our institutions rest is that in the small and subordinate communities the people should regulate their own affairs to the greatest practicable extent, leaving the least possible to be done by the State and General Governments. The opposite course of governing the subordinate communities through commissions appointed by the Legislature, has been tried in several States, and always with the most disastrous results; the little finger of the commission has proved thicker than the loins of those chosen directly by the people.

I desire in all earnestness and seriousness to impress upon the citizens of New Jersey the fact that it is the duty of each one of them to interest himself in the affairs of his community, as he does in his own private business.

He who fails to exert himself to secure the selection of good and honest men for office, who abstains from voting, who does not keep himself informed of the action of the authorities, and use his influence to guide them aright, not only neglects a paramount duty, but, under such institutions as ours, is guilty of a grave fault.

If many of our communities are now suffering from heavy debts and oppressive taxation, it is because the people have too often neglected their duty, by failing to interest themselves in the selection of proper men for office, and in the doings of officials. In many instances the case is very serious, certainly not easy to be promptly remedied.

There is only one way to obtain relief and to prevent the continuance of the evil. That remedy is with the people themselves. In the counties, in the cities, in the townships, in the villages, let each citizen recognize the fact that he cannot divest

himself of responsibility; let every one attend the meetings at which candidates for office are selected, and see to it that only honest and fit men are chosen; let him give to those candidates earnest and active support, not only before the election, but after they have entered upon the duties of office. Insist that every unnecessary or premature improvement shall be discontinued or postponed, dispense with all useless offices, see that contracts are honest and fair, cut down all expenses to the minimum consistent with real efficiency, and it will certainly be found that a reduction in taxation has been effected much greater than any that can be looked for from the State Government. With such care and economy on the part of a people so intelligent as ours, it may well be assumed that county and municipal taxes can be reduced within endurable limits, and that with the return of prosperity the heavy debts which now weigh down so many communities may gradually be paid off. If our people neglect or are indifferent to their public duties, they cannot expect relief, but must be content to abide the consequences of their own apathy. It is, perhaps, a feeling common to the majority of men to expect relief from some remote source, neglecting, meanwhile, the remedies at their door; but if our people fail to bestir themselves in correcting the abuses which too often prevail in the smaller communities, and content themselves with vaguely expecting from the State Government more than it can possibly accomplish, they are doomed to disappointment.

All branches of the government, down to the smallest subdivision, must do their part if substantial relief is to be afforded and a radical remedy reached.

There is no doubt that the State Government will perform its share of the work, but it is absolutely necessary that all the people should do theirs as well.

I trust that neither we nor the generation which succeeds us will forget the lessons impressed by the sufferings of the present. If our people are true to themselves and their duty, we shall again see prosperous and happy times.

Gentlemen of the Legislature and fellow citizens, in accordance with the requirements of the law, I have taken the usual oath of office and that of allegiance to this State. I have taken them in no spirit of mere formality, but with the firm intention to

do, with God's help, all that in me lies to promote the peace and prosperity of the people, and to maintain the lawful rights of the State. I shall not consciously leave aught undone to accomplish these great objects.

I trust that when the term of office to which the confidence of the people of the State has called me shall have expired, I may enjoy the satisfaction of leaving them prosperous and happy, with no right or dignity of our Commonwealth impaired by any act of mine.

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